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FINE ART



Pair of Pietra Dura Obelisks

Rome, second quarter of the 17th Century

Jasper, agate, lapis lazuli, ebonized wood, gilt metal

64.5 x 14.5 x 12 cm

25 3/8 x 5 3/4 x 4 3/4 in

Literature

- R. Valeriani, "Pair of Obelisks", in R. Valeriani, Ed., *Pietre Dure. Hardstones, Marbles, Mosaics*, London 2019, pp. 34-37, No. 6 (Illustrated).

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PIETRE DURE

Hardstones, Marbles, Mosaics

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BRUN FINE ART - LONDON

Rome, second quarter of the 17th century

PAIR OF OBELISKS

Jasper, agate and lapis lazuli, ebonized wood, gilt metal, 64.6 x 14.5 x 12 cm

Provenance: Robert de Balkany collection

The front part of the wooden structure is inlaid with hard stones. Tall plinths, on bases, are decorated with lozenges with chamfered edges in lapis lazuli on a jasper ground. Four gilded spheres support the obelisks, with geometrical motifs in lapis lazuli on a background of red jasper; in the middle an agate oval within a larger lapis lazuli oval is edged in gilded metal, the same material used to make the spheres with pinnacle on the top.

The decoration of these two ornaments of architectural form seems characteristic of the Roman Baroque taste for hardstones, based on a sharp colour contrast between the various small pieces that are not used to form naturalistic figures, as was the case at the time in Florence, but only more or less complex shapes. The inlay of stones on a background of other stones only creates geometrical shapes and often the variously coloured pieces are separated by metal edges that serve to hold them together more firmly and accentuate the geometry of the whole. This type of workmanship enjoyed constant popularity in Rome starting from the last two decades of the 16th century, as evidenced by the monumental cabinet of Sixtus V at Stourhead (Wiltshire) dating to around 1585, and persisted into the high Baroque period up to the second half of the 17th century.¹ Numerous 17th-century cabinets executed in Rome express this luxurious style, in which the architectural form is tempered by the rich and luminous tones of the hardstones. The cutters of hardstones (often jewellers, who had access to specialized technologies for siliceous materials) and cabinetmakers also collaborated at this time to create various types of furnishings like

¹ For the cabinet of Sixtus V. A. González-Palacios, *Mosaici e pietre dure. Firenze, Paesi germanici, Madrid*, Milan, 1981, p. 19; S. S. Jervis, D. Dodd, *Roman Splendour. English Arcadia. The English taste for Pietre Dure and the Sixtus Cabinet at Stourhead*, London, 2015.



superb watch cases or pieces of furniture destined for private devotion, of the same sort as the *altare* also discussed in these pages. The piece of furniture that perhaps displays the greatest originality in this field was the bed belonging to Cardinal Ludovico Ludovisi, nephew of Gregory XV, still unfinished on the cardinal's death in 1632: at the time it was in the Casino dell'Aurora in Villa Ludovisi in Rome; a century later all trace of it had been lost, but from the description we learn that the entire structure, from the columns to the base, from the headboard to the canopy, was in this type of luxurious technique based on the use of wood, gilded copper and hardstones.²

Our two obelisks should be considered rare evidence of independent decorative architectural elements. The solemn and evocative image of the obelisk, called more frequently at the time "pyramid" or "spire", executed in a wide variety of materials (see those in majolica from Faenza, contemporary with ours, in the Museo della Ceramica in the same city), is in some cases used to complete the top of cabinets in precious materials, not just in Rome: among the possessions of the Gonzaga family, in Mantua, a list of 1626 included "an ebony writing cabinet, made in Augsburg" decorated in silver "with at the top five figures in silver and four pyramids".³

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² G. Felici, *Villa Ludovisi in Roma*, Rome, 1952, pp. 155-165.

³ R. Morselli, *Le Collezioni Gonzaga. L'elenco dei beni 1626-1627*, Milan, 2000, p. 357, no. 1836. A cabinet crowned with obelisks made in Venice with inlays in ivory and mother of pearl is illustrated in A. González-Palacios, *Il Tempio del Gusto. La Toscana e l'Italia settentrionale*, Milan, 1984, Fig. 694.

